



an excerpt from
Zen Master Wu Kwang's
new book

DON'T-KNOW MIND: THE SPIRIT OF KOREAN ZEN

Zen Master Seung Sahn's *Dropping Ashes on the Buddha*

*Understanding that all things are one;
Do you also understand that the ten thousand things
forever remain distinct?
If you fall down in emptiness, you may lose your life.
No point giving medicine to a dead horse.
Become one,
Distinctness, clinging to nothingness.
What is it that transcends these?
Look!
Above blue sky,
In front of the door green trees,
Below your feet the brown wooden floor.*

During the early days of Zen in China, there was one master who was fond of using this teaching phrase, "The whole world in the ten directions is one bright jewel."

One day a monk came forward in the assembly and said, "Master, you always say the whole world in the ten directions is one bright jewel. How is one to understand that?"

The Zen master responded, "This whole world in the ten directions is one bright jewel. What has understanding got to do with it?"

The next day, when the master was walking around the grounds of the temple, he saw the monk and said to him, "This whole world in the ten directions is only one bright jewel. How do you understand that?"

The monk replied, "This whole world in the ten directions is one bright jewel. What has understanding got to do with it?"

The Zen master said, "I knew you were making your living in a ghost cave on the far side of the mountain," and walked away.

Seen from a certain perspective, this is a story about flexibility. One time, "What has understanding got to do with it?" The other time, "How do you understand that?" All the while holding to this one point, "The whole world in the ten directions is one bright jewel."

Flexibility means free functioning. How can we perceive something in this moment, yet let go of it in the very next moment? How can we perceive something from one perspective, then from another perspective a moment later? How can we sometimes see something from two perspectives simultaneously? And most important, how can we use that clear seeing to function freely and help this world?

Zen Master Seung Sahn has one kong-an that he uses to test students, called "Dropping Ashes on the Buddha." This kong-an emphasizes the different aspects of Zen seeing and functioning. But before going into the kong-an, let me say a little about my teacher. Seung Sahn Dae Soen Sa Nim (*Soen Sa Nim* is Korean for Zen Master; *Dae* means great or complete and is a title given to older, respected teachers) was born in 1927 and is the dharma successor to Zen Master Ko Bong. After the end of the Second World War, when he was in his late teens and feeling that his academic studies were not satisfying his deeper questions, Seung Sahn became a novice monk. Shortly thereafter he went to Won Gak Mountain to do a hundred-day solo retreat during which he chanted the "Great Dharani of the Mystic Mind Energy," a long mantra associated with the bodhisattva of universal compassion. Near the end of the retreat, he had a deep awakening and wrote this enlightenment poem:

The road at the bottom of Won Gak Mountain
Is not the present road.
The Man climbing the hill with his backpack
Is not a man of the past

Tok, tok—his footsteps
Transfix past and present.

Crows out of a tree.
Caw, caw, caw.¹

When Seung Sahn descended from the mountain, he joined a small Zen community of laypeople at Magoksa Temple. There, in 1949, he met Zen Master Ko Bong, who asked him the kong-an,

Why did Bodhidharma come to China?
Joju [Chin., Chao-chou; Jap., Joshu] answered,
"The cyprus tree in the garden."
What does this mean?

Seung Sahn understood, but because he was new to Zen, he did not know how to respond. He replied, "I don't know."

"Only keep this don't know mind," said Ko Bong. "This is true Zen practice."

In the fall of the same year, Seung Sahn went to Sudoksa Temple to sit the three-month winter retreat. There he heard monks and Zen masters engage each other in dharma combat and began to master the style of Zen language. When the retreat ended he went to Seoul to see Ko Bong again. On the way, he had interviews with Zen Masters Keum Bong and Keum Oh. In their dharma combat with Seung Sahn, each acknowledged his awakening. When he again met Ko Bong, they had an intense interview during which Seung Sahn was stuck for a while, for Ko Bong refused to accept answers to the kong-an he had posed. The two sat facing each other in tense silence for fifty minutes, then suddenly the correct answer appeared to Seung Sahn, and Ko Bong said, "Your flower has blossomed and I am the bee."

In 1950 Seung Sahn received dharma transmission from Ko Bong, making him the seventy-eighth patriarch in that particular line from Shakyamuni Buddha. Ko Bong said, "Some day Korean Buddhism will spread to the whole world through you. We will meet again in 500 years."

Seung Sahn spent the next three years in silence to deepen his experience and understanding. After the Korean War, during which he served as a chaplain in the army, he became abbot of Hwagyesa Temple in Seoul. He also looked after his aging and sick teacher Ko Bong. He was the visiting Zen master of five temples in Seoul and the instructor in Zen at Dongguk University.

An interesting episode from this period concerns the bones of five hundred dead kept in what had been a Japanese temple in Seoul, which was now under the control of some Korean laypeople. At that time there was still considerable bad feeling toward the Japanese. The people in charge of the temple wanted to throw away the bones of their former enemies. When Zen Master Seung Sahn heard of this, he had the bones removed to Hwagyesa Temple, where he chanted the rite for the dead spirits for days on end. He proclaimed: "Whether these bones were once Korean or Japanese is immaterial. Dead bones are dead bones!" A few years later, when Korea and Japan resumed diplomatic relations, some Japanese came to Hwagyesa and carried the bones of their ancestors back to their homeland. Out of appreciation and deep respect for Seung Sahn's action, the Japanese invited him to go to Japan. Thus, during the 1960s, he also taught in Japan, as well as in Hong Kong.

In 1972 Seung Sahn decided to come to the United States to teach. After spending a short time in Los Angeles, he went to Providence, Rhode Island. He had almost no money and knew only a few words of English. He took a job repairing washing machines in a Korean-run laundromat, then rented an apartment—meanwhile taking a course in English at Harvard University. Soon some students from Brown University began coming to study with him, and the Providence Zen Center was born.

Within the next few years, Zen centers in Cambridge, New Haven, New York, Berkeley, and Los Angeles began to form around his teaching and under his guidance. Later Seung Sahn went to Poland and other eastern and western European countries where more centers were formed and evolved. Eventually, all the meditation centers became part of the Kwan Um School of Zen. By then, he had fulfilled Ko Bong's prophesy that Korean Buddhism would "spread to the whole world through you."

In the years that followed, Seung Sahn's kong-an, "Dropping Ashes on the Buddha," became a major teaching tool. It says:

Someone comes into the Zen center, blows smoke, and drops ashes on the Buddha. If you are there at that time, how can you fix this person's mind?

The first question, of course, is, "Who is this person who comes into the Zen Center, blows smoke, and drops ashes on the Buddha?" Well, surprise, surprise! From one perspective, it is none other than ourselves. How are we making a big smokescreen and obscuring what actually is? How are we covering things with our own conceptions, opinions, and ideation? How are we dropping ashes on the Buddha and covering it with dust?

This kong-an also poses some other questions, for instance, "What is the Zen Center? Is it this room? Is it some particular place?" And, "Is there *coming into* or *going out of* something called the Zen Center?" If you think there is coming into and going out of the Zen Center, you have missed the original Zen Center. But, on the other hand, if you think that there is a Zen Center apart from coming into and going out of, that is also not seeing clearly. Form is emptiness; emptiness is, itself, form.

I was reminded of this the other day when I received a catalogue from Sonoma Mountain Zen Center, in California, which is led by Jakusho Kwong Roshi, a successor of Suzuki Roshi. They sell such things as incense, meditation beads, Buddha statues, books, and tapes in their store. The title of the catalogue was *Zen Dust*. Once I went to the New Haven Zen Center and found a rack with incoming and outgoing mail. They had one shelf holding flyers from every meditation center in the universe. They had labeled it "Dharma Junk. If you want something, take."

From the most fundamental, radical perspective, of course, many things—the incense, the gold Buddha, the beads—even these chapters—are junk, or "dust." But sometimes dust is quite useful; it depends how you use it.

In the classical kong-ans of *The Blue Cliff Record*, there are two cases that make similar points to the "dropping ashes" kong-an. One is called "Mu-chou's Impostor":

One day a monk approached Zen master Mu-chou (Jap., Bokushu; Kor., Muk Ju), and Mu-chou asked, "Just now, where are you coming from?"

The monk shouted, "KATZ!"

Mu-chou said, "You shouted at this old monk once." [That means, "Your shout is not bad as a first response, a demonstration of the nameless energy that

everything emerges from, but is that all? Or is there something else that you have to present?"]

The monk shouted a second time.

Mu-chou said, "And after four or five shouts, then what?"

The monk was speechless, so Mu-chou hit him and said, "You impostor!"³

Where are *you* coming from just now? Moment by moment, coming from where? From one perspective, everything comes from this unnamable, ungraspable, inconceivable point. But if you are attached to that, then you become completely blind. That is why Mu-chou said, "After four or five shouts, then what?"

A second related case is a story about Dok Sahn (Chin., Te-shan; Jap., Tokusan) and Wi Sahn (Chin., Kuei-shan, Jap., Isan). When Dok Sahn was a young monk, he was very fiery. He had had some kind of breakthrough experience and had a lot of fire in his belly from this experience, presenting himself fiercely and radically. Eventually, he got a reputation as that kind of fellow. He came to have an interview with Zen Master Wi Sahn and, the story says, "He came into the dharma room still carrying his bundle."

When monks at that time traveled the roads from one temple to another, they would keep their ceremonial dress in something like a knapsack. When they got to a temple, they would take off their dusty road-traveling clothes and put on their ceremonial monk's clothes before going into a dharma hall or meeting the Zen master. But here it says that Dok Sahn came into the dharma room "still carrying his bundle." It is a telling expression. Carrying what? Holding on to what?

Then he walked from east to west and west to east, across the room, and said, "There is nothing, nothing."

Nothing, in Chinese, that is the word *wu* (Kor. & Jap., *mu*). After "Nothing, nothing," the compiler of these stories—they probably existed for a few hundred years before being turned into anthologies—wrote a comment, almost a little heckle: "Completely exposed." Then the story continues:

And [Dok Sahn] walked out. But when he got to the gate, he thought to himself, "I should not be so brash." So he composed himself, put down his bundle for a moment, and came back into the dharma room and did a prostration. But then he held up his sitting mat and yelled out, "Master!" Wi Sahn grabbed for his horsehair whisk and held it up." [In those days, the Zen master would have had a horsehair whisk as a symbol saying, "I am the Zen master."] Then, Dok Sahn suddenly shouted, "KATZ!" whirled around, and walked out of the dharma hall. He put on his straw sandals and left.

The compiler writes in again, "Completely exposed." The story continues:

That night Wi Sahn asked the head monk, "That newcomer who was here this morning, what happened to him?"

The head monk said, "When he got to the door, he put on his straw sandals and never turned back."

Wi Sahn said, "Some day that fellow will go to a high summit, build himself a small hut, and go on cursing the Buddha and the patriarchs."

After that, the compiler writes, "Adding frost to snow"⁴—redundant.

If you look at the person in the "Dropping Ashes" kong-an, you see a similar position: What is completely exposed there?

In one way you have to admire that person. There is a certain tenacity, really holding to a position and not letting go. As Zen Master Seung Sahn says, "This man is very strong. To any speech or action of yours, he will only hit you. This man thinks, 'I already have enlightenment. I already am Buddha.'" No life, no death—he has attained one point. But he is attached to his one point, attached to emptiness.

However, tenacity can turn into rigidity when you are afraid to let go and face creative uncertainty, and that becomes a problem. What is Dok Sahn afraid to let go of? His *nothing*. It has become his prized possession. "Nothing, nothing! KATZ!" And what is the cigarette man, the man blowing smoke and dropping ashes on the Buddha, afraid of letting go of? His view of oneness, that all things are one, and empty of name and form: cigarettes, ashes, Buddha, they are all the same for him.

Once an eminent Zen master, addressing the assembly, posed a question: "[The mind is] like a mirror casting images. When an image is formed, where has the shine of the mirror gone?" "The shine of the mirror" means that if the mirror is completely empty, then it is just brightly shining. Our mind, like a mirror brightly shining, continuously casts images; thoughts are flowing nonstop. When an image is formed, where has the shine gone? At that time, where is the mind's original radiance?

That is like saying that in meditation my mind may become still, quiet, serene, clear, one-pointed, focused; then all of a sudden images, images, thinking, thinking, feeling, feeling, all these things appear. Where has original quiet gone? Where has original brightness gone at the moment thinking begins to appear and form?

After the Zen master asked his question, various people came forward, presenting different answers. But he did not like any of them. Then a monk came forward, bowed, and said, "Still not far off."

"Still not far off"—that is called Zen faith. Even at the moment of image after image appearing, still not far off. Intimately close, in fact. Closer than is imaginable. So image after image, form after form, that is called miraculous display. No problem. At that time: Original radiance is still not far off.

But the cigarette man does not understand this. So he clings to oneness, without seeing oneness in diversity. He makes a lopsided oneness, then attaches to it. He loses

his ability to function and respond to circumstances appropriately.

Zen Master Seung Sahn sometimes likes to teach the cognitive aspect of Zen understanding by using loosely organized schemas. At one time he would use a circle and point to the different degrees on the circle as indicating different facets or aspects of Zen mind. Now, of course, in a circle 0 degrees and 360 degrees are the same point, which means that where you start from and where you complete the circle are not different points. This is a representation of "Zen mind is beginner's mind"; there is no before and after; no coming and no going. Most radically, this means this moment in its completeness. Seung Sahn would also always be careful to warn students that ultimately the circle and its degrees do not exist. It is only a teaching device that was not to be attached to or reified. To use a teaching schema or device is certainly not new in the Zen tradition. During the Tang Dynasty in China (618-907 CE) schema were used by various teaching lines. In the Soto tradition there were five ranks that described five different ways of viewing the relationship between the absolute and the relative and between the real and the apparent. The Lin-chi (Jap., Rinzai) tradition also had its formulas. There were classifications of host and guest, the host being that which never moves and the guest being something that comes and goes. Lin-chi would also talk about the four different functions of his famous Zen shout, "KATZI!"

Another form of presentation of Zen Master Seung Sahn's teacher describes three point, which are clearly stated: substance, truth, and function. "First, we teach substance by using one action, such as holding up a finger, shouting KATZI, or just hitting the floor. Next, we teach about *truth world*: the cushion is yellow, the floor is brown, the wall is white, the sky is blue. There is nothing that is not truth. Everything is truth, everything is clear. If we can attain this truth world, then we can use it in our function—to help suffering beings everywhere. We call this function the *bodhisattva way*." ⁵ The "Dropping Ashes on the Buddha" kong-an is a way of testing the student's attainment and assimilation of these various facets of Zen mind.

In the doctrinal and sutra traditions there is a similar schema called the *four wisdoms*. The first is the wisdom of great equality (being able to see that all things share the same basic principal or substance or essence). The second is the great mirror wisdom, seeing things as they are (mountains are mountains, rivers are rivers). The third is the great discernment wisdom, or perceiving the exact characteristics of all things. One could say that discernment wisdom is a refinement of the mirror wisdom; one perceives that the mountains are high and that rivers are flowing. The last is the perfecting of action, or using the perception of equality and the exact characteristics of all things, people, and situations to help this world, in compassionate, selfless action.

Not long ago I received a newsletter from the Providence Zen Center containing an interchange between Zen Master Seung Sahn and a student. The student said, "This world is continuously changing. So how come there is only one correct answer to a kong-an?"

Dae Soen Sa Nim replied, "This world is constantly changing? I did not know that. I thought this world was completely empty." ⁶

The point is that if you see this world as changing, changing, changing, that is your perspective. Someone else says, "No, no, this world is not just changing, changing, changing. This world is completely empty. Form is emptiness." But a third person says, "No, this world is not completely empty, this world is truth." That means, if your mind is completely empty, like a bright, shining mirror, then each and every thing is reflected therein. Its true nature and true being appear in the mirror. "Sky is blue" appears, "tree is green" appears, "floor is brown" appears. Each is just expressing the truth of its particular being and nature.

Or think about the ocean, an image used frequently in Buddhist philosophy. First, perceive the essential nature of water. Then, consider that this ocean is giving rise to wave after wave, each with its own unique character, form, and qualities at any given moment—and each an expression of the power of the entire, essential ocean.

Yet, also observe that each particular wave is in relationship with many others. So from that perspective, there is nothing but relationship. This wave is interdependent with that wave. That wave is interdependent with this wave. Likewise, I am talking, so you are listening. You are listening, so I am talking. So that is about relationship; there is nothing but relationship. If there is nothing but relationship, then what is our correct relationship with each and every thing, moment by moment?

Someone says, "This world is not empty world, this world is truth world." Another person says, "No this is not just truth world, it is great love, great compassion, bodhisattva-function world." That means, if your mind is clear, if you perceive the depth and then reflect clearly, perceiving each thing just as it is and honoring each thing for its own unique expressiveness, then what is your relationship to this, that, and the other? How do you use yourself in this world? Are you self-centered? Or not self-centered? How? That is where function and relationship appear.

Now, back to the guy with the cigarette and the ashes: He only understands that everything is all one. When he drops ashes on the Buddha, that is like saying, "Buddha, ashes, everything is all just one." Like pea soup. You cook up all the peas until they loose their distinctness and become just puree. The man with the cigarette has become attached to that perspective. He does not perceive that each thing simultaneously maintains its distinctness and its own characteristics; he also fails to perceive his own relationship to all these things.

So how can we help him fix his mind? How can we fix our own, so we perceive all of these together and realize that everything is unified in some way, that we are all somehow of the same family? And that even though this is true—that we are all of the same family and all one—there are still distinct characteristics that must be respected

and honored and appreciated. If we do that, that is true freedom.

There is also the notion that the attachment of the bodhisattva—the vow to save all beings—is actually freedom. The bodhisattva's *saving* has a particular kind of meaning. In that sense, to *save* something is to see its value and to take care of it. Taking care of something is a very different kind of attachment. Entering into a life of caring and of being cared for is not the same as clinging tightly to something out of fear of letting go—fear that then the whole thing may fall apart and I may die, or God knows what will happen.

Remember Dok Sahn's "*mu*," or *nothing*? There's not much to hold onto there. Yet Dok Sahn walked into the dharma room still carrying his bundle—his *mu* bundle—and exclaimed quite loudly, "*Mu*." So the commentator wrote, "Completely exposed."

Holding momentarily is not a problem; it is rigidity that becomes the problem. If you clutch to something as if the whole of existence depends on it, then nothing comes of it.

A student once said to me, "I've recently come to New York from Kansas and am having culture shock. There are so many people here who seem to need things, to need help, and I don't know how to help them. Sometimes it seems that it may be better not to help them."

I said, "Yes, not helping may actually be helping them in some instances."

The student responded, "I feel really confused in my practice and in knowing how to help people. Am I holding onto ideas I brought to New York from Kansas?"

I replied, "Kansas is quite distinct from New York, so you left the kong-an of Kansas and entered the kong-an of New York. Different kinds of kong-ans hit different areas of your mind. The New York kong-an is a complicated, complex one, with no easy solution. With some kong-ans, you have an intuitive flash, 'Oh yes, simple!' The New York kong-an is not quite like that. One can spend several lifetimes working on the kong-an of New York City. Don't be too despondent after a few days of being here. It is disorienting at first. From one perspective, the kong-an of New York is something that you may never pass or solve. But whatever you do with sincerity—in any particular day, any particular moment—is an expression of your compassion. When you see so much suffering and don't know what to do, or feel a certain sense of remorse coming from your heart, that is the expression of your enlightened activity at that moment. Sometimes, out of that, something else will become clear: Perhaps a feeling of something to do, or something not to do. And sometimes you will just be confused. I hope you enjoy your stay in New York. I think you will learn a lot here."

Here is a short story about Zen Master Soeng Hyang (Barbara Rhodes) that speaks to this point of not holding rigidity, and about functioning in a helping way. Several years ago, Zen Master Soeng Hyang (actually, this happened before she became a Zen master) wrote an article describing her work as a hospice nurse.⁷ She told about making a home visit one day to a woman who was dying

of cancer and suffering a tremendous amount of pain. She had worked with this woman and her family for some time, and had introduced visualization exercises and sitting in silence. The family was Roman Catholic, so sometimes they would try a silent prayer. On this day, she gave the patient a shot of morphine to ease the pain, then said to the woman and family members, "Let's sit silently and pray for ten or fifteen minutes." When they looked at each other again, the patient smiled warmly at Soeng Hyang. Apparently the morphine, along with the meditation, had worked. Soeng Hyang recalled thinking, "Yes, this is how it's going to be." The woman would have this wonderful home death, and her smile reminded Soeng Hyang of Mahakashyapa's smile when Buddha held up his flower. How satisfying it was to be this wonderful hospice nurse, providing this wonderful home death.

But then the woman's condition changed, and Soeng Hyang worried, "That's not how it is supposed to be. What happened?" That thought arose over and over again as the woman's disease and her own adaptability took unusual turns. It was not "this smooth, wonderful home death that I, this wonderful hospice nurse, give to you." In reporting this process, Soeng Hyang genuinely reveals the way that she, at that time, would get stuck, then have to reflect back on herself and find some way of letting go while opening to the next experience. In a death and dying situation, the course of events and the flow of life will rip you open at times, almost as if there is no choice but to go with it.

At the end of the story, the woman passes away and Soeng Hyang joins the family after the funeral. They had their Catholic ideas and prayers, she said, and she had her Buddhist ideas and practices. But no one, she wrote, knew where this woman had gone. Catholics could not adequately tell where she had gone; neither could she, a Buddhist. No one really knew. All they knew was that during her final days, this woman's process had been a great teaching to all of them.⁸

Don't hold anything.

1. Seung Sahn. *Bone of Space*. Cumberland, RI: Primary Point Press, 1992, p. 57.
2. Seung Sahn. *Dropping Ashes on the Buddha*. Ed. by Stephen Mitchell. New York: Grove Press, 1976, p. 85.
3. *The Blue Cliff Record*. Trans. by Zen Master Seung Sahn. Cumberland, RI: Kwan Um School of Zen, 1994, p. 21.
4. *Ibid.*, 15.
5. *Primary Point* 5, no. 1 (1988): 1.
6. *Primary Point* 14, no. 2 (1996): 1.
7. *Primary Point* 5, no. 1 (1988): 3.
8. *Primary Point* 5, no. 1 (1988): 3. ☸